



Revelation - Chapter Thirteen

V. Revelation 12:1-14:20 - The cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan (continues)

Summary of Chapter Thirteen

At this time John saw two beasts. The first one rose out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns, and blasphemous names on its heads. On one of its heads it had a mortal wound that had been healed. He had been given great power and authority from the dragon and the whole earth followed him and worshipped the dragon because of this. This beast was allowed to use this authority for forty-two months. During this period God's name was blasphemed and the saints were persecuted.

The second beast had come out of the earth and it had two horns like a lamb but spoke like a dragon. It also had the same authority as the first beast and led the people of the earth to worship the first beast. This beast performed many great signs by which he deceived the people of earth and forced all to be marked on their right hand or forehead with the mark of the beast, the number of its name is 666, so that no one could buy or sell unless they had this mark. This beast is known as the False Prophet.

In many translations 12:18 forms part of 13:1 and therefore the new section is reflected as part of this chapter. In others, it forms part of 12:17 as will be commented on shortly.

V.b Revelation 12:18-13:10 - The First Beast

As the dragon stands on the seashore, a beast emerges from the sea. This beast is sometimes identified with the Antichrist: <<*Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour*>> (1 John 2:18), and: <<*Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist!*>> (2 John 7), or the man of lawlessness described by Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12.

Its blasphemous words and demand for worship reinforce the connections between these predictions of a final, future opponent to Christ's reign. Yet the imagery of Daniel Chapter 7 that appears in the description of the beast shows that it represents not only a future individual but also present world powers that wage Satan's war against the Lamb and his church.

Most dispensationalists, and many other futurists, think the first beast is a political world leader and the second beast is his religious counterpart, who enforces worship of the first beast.

¹⁸ Then the dragon took his stand on the sand of the seashore. ¹ And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads; and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names. ² And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And the dragon gave it his power and his throne and great authority.

Revelation 12:18-13:1-2

Then the dragon took his stand on the sand of the seashore. Some older translations state: <<*And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea*>> (v.1a KJV), indicating that it was John who watched the scene unfolding. This has come about from later Greek manuscripts that have *estathen* or 'I stood', whereas the better and older manuscripts have *estathe* or 'he stood', which clearly identifies it as the dragon who observes the beast rising out of the sea. However, those who choose to include this statement as part of 12:17 see it as the dragon making a stand against the church.

And I saw returns attention to John being an eyewitness to what was taking place before him, just as he had frequently used in Chapters 4-10.

The beast looks like a leopard but has feet like a bear's, a mouth like a lion's mouth, and ten horns, and it wages 'war on the saints' (v.7). Thus it resembles all four beasts that Daniel saw emerge from the sea before the Son of Man appeared (Daniel 7:1-8 and 7:21). Just as those beasts symbolised kingdoms (Daniel 7:17 and 7:23), so this beast, a composite of them all, represents every human empire: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, and their successors, that demands absolute allegiance and trust, enforcing its demand with coercion. Its ten horns and seven heads mirror those of the dragon (12:3), who gives the beast its great authority. Because of this, and an indication that the dragon may have summoned the beast out of the sea, some commentators believe that this may be his offspring immersing on the scene. The primary difference between the two is that the beast has ten diadems to the dragon's seven but, since its authority comes from the dragon, this does not make it superior to him.

³ One of its heads seemed to have received a death-blow, but its mortal wound had been healed. In amazement the whole earth followed the beast.

Revelation 13:3

One of its heads seemed to have received a death-blow, but its mortal wound had been healed. It appears that the beast has the battle scars from the ancient promise of God: <<*he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel*>> (Genesis 3:15b). Literally, it appeared 'as slain to death'. The beast falsely imitates the Lamb, 'standing, as though it had been slain' (5:6).

Rome, the manifestation of the beast in John's day, seemed to have been mortally wounded by Nero's suicide (AD68), and the civil chaos that followed, but experienced a 'resurrection' in the reigns of Vespasian and his sons Titus and Domitian. Then in Domitian's reign (AD81-96), Nero's beastly persecution of the church also revived. Many interpreters think this verse also predicts a future remarkable recovery of the Antichrist from a deadly wound, a deceptive attempt to parallel Christ's resurrection.

In amazement the whole earth followed the beast. Those who have come into a relationship with Jesus and know of his love and great sacrifice will find this statement astounding. Yet history has shown that many in the world, including at least some from the church or other faith groups, have indeed followed the way of the world that the beast so openly controls. However, v.8 will actually show that the whole earth does not include those who are written in the Book of Life.

⁴ They worshipped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshipped the beast, saying, 'Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?'

Revelation 13:4

Both the dragon and the beast are worshipped. The first is <<*the deceiver of the whole world*>> (12:9b), where as the other one has been given his authority to carry out this great deceit.

Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it? The worshipers' question copies Israel's praise of the Lord after the exodus: <<*Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendour, doing wonders?*>> (Exodus 15:11), reinforcing the beast's arrogant claim to divine honours. It also mirrors the acclamation often given to Cæsar as he entered cities.

⁵ The beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months.

Revelation 13:5

Was given a mouth, was allowed to exercise authority. This is similar to the opening verses of Chapter Nine where the star was given the key to the abyss and the locusts given authority to sting.

The beast uttered haughty and blasphemous words, like the horn did, which represented a king, on the fourth beast in Daniel's vision, refer to Daniel 7:20 and 7:25.

Forty-two months is the same period attributed to the nations trampling over the holy city (11:1-2). It is one-half of a sabbatical-year cycle, symbolising the brevity of the church's suffering, which lasts until Christ returns. Many futurists think this is the second half of the great tribulation.

⁶ It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven.

Revelation 13:6

Those who dwell in heaven are the angels who faithfully serve God and are the spiritual counterpart of the church on earth. By using its mouth to utter blasphemies against God to these angels, the beast is engaged in an act of spiritual warfare against them just as he is with the church in v.7.

The identification of God's dwelling with those who dwell in heaven confirms that the measured sanctuary (11:1) symbolised the worshipers in it. Likewise, the 'holy city' is the Lamb's church-bride (21:2), also indicated by Paul: <<*In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God*>> (Ephesians 2:22), and: <<*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish*>> (Ephesians 5:25-27). It is Jesus' earnest desire that the church be with him in his glory: <<*Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world*>> (John 17:24).

⁷ Also, it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. It was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation,⁸ and all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered.

Revelation 13:7-8

To make war on the saints and to conquer them. The martyrdom of believers seems to be their defeat, but their death-defying faithfulness conquers the dragon and the beast (12:11 and 15:2).

It was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it. Again, there are some who believe that it was given authority by God, while others believe the authority came from Satan who was deluded about his own level of authority, which he claimed while testing Jesus in the wilderness: <<*And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please'*>> (Luke 4:6).

Written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered. Before creation and by grace alone, God chose individuals to be redeemed by Christ's death; refer to Ephesians 1:4-14 and the comments on Ephesians 1:11. God's registry of life appears in Exodus 32:32-33, Daniel 12:1, Luke 10:20, Revelation 3:5, 17:8 and 20:15. Those not enrolled in the Lamb's book of life blindly worship the beast and will be cast with it into the lake of fire. The parallel expression in 17:8 indicates that from the foundation of the world is best taken to modify written rather than slaughtered as in some translations.

⁹ Let anyone who has an ear listen:

¹⁰ If you are to be taken captive,
into captivity you go;
if you kill with the sword,
with the sword you must be killed.

Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

Revelation 13:9-10

Let anyone who has an ear listen is reminiscent to the call to the seven churches in Chapters 2-3, e.g. <<*Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches*>> (Revelation 2:7a).

Because captivity and sword are God's ordained route to victory for his saints, they must practice endurance and maintain their faith. Perseverance is a major theme in Revelation.

The appeal in v.10 is based on Jeremiah 15:2. It contradicts those who claim that the book of Revelation is about war, violence and insurrection, i.e. if you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed. John makes it quite clear that it is none of those things but instead a call for the endurance and faith of the saints: <<*And we want each one of you to show the same diligence, so as to realise the full assurance of hope to the very end, so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises*>> (Hebrews 6:11-12).

The burning question in the minds of John's readers must have been: 'If all these terrible things are going to happen in the world, what should be our response?' The answer to this text, and of the whole book of Revelation, is that the response of Christians must be one of non-resistance and non-retaliation: first, because armed resistance will be futile in any case; and second, and more importantly, because God and the Lamb have already guaranteed them victory.

Those who overcome do so not with the sword, but with 'the blood of the Lamb' and 'the word of their testimony' (12:11). For the present, John is saying, until the beast's forty-two months are up (v.5), those destined for imprisonment will go to prison and those destined for death will be killed. The sole responsibility of Christians is to be faithful and to wait out the storm. God and the Lamb will intervene in due time. John's point is not unlike that of Paul:

<<Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good>> (Romans 12:19-21).

V.c Revelation 13:11-18 - The Second Beast

A second beast rose out of the earth to enlist worshipers for the first beast through lying words and miracles. Later called the 'false prophet' (16:13 and 19:20), this beast wields power through deceptive words. In John's day the imperial cult in Asia fostered worship of the empire and the emperor as the divine saviour and lawgiver. The abuse of religious devotion to manipulate thoughtless allegiance to the state is an ageless phenomenon.

¹¹ Then I saw another beast that rose out of the earth; it had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. ¹² It exercises all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and it makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound had been healed.

Revelation 13:11-12

Then I saw another beast that rose out of the earth. The language introduces a continuation in the vision but identifies a second object brought to his attention. The second beast resembles the Lamb, but its lying words expose its real nature; it is just like a dragon. The two beasts, however, are not quite interchangeable. The beast from the earth, called in later visions 'the false prophet' (16:13, 19:20 and 20:10), is in no way a rival or a competitor of the beast from the sea, but on the contrary is strictly subordinate to the first beast, i.e. it exercises all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and it makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast. Its mission is not to exalt itself or to demand worship for itself, but solely to make sure that the earth's inhabitants worship the first beast (vv.14-15).

Thus the image given between the two beasts is like that between state and church. Where the state allows the church to operate freely or at least its activities are tolerated, then believers are called to be good citizens of the state (Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17). However, the relationship here shows the second beast, representing the religious sector, leads the people to worship the first beast, i.e. the state. In such a case, believers are to relinquish their citizenship in order to remain faithful to the church. It would seem that John is drawing a parallel to the situation with the Roman Empire, where the emperor was seen as divine and commanded the worship of the people. The people in view here are not the church but the population as a whole who are being deceived into giving false allegiance.

It is possible that John's readers noticed here a kind of twisted parallel to the Christian triad of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In early Christian thought, especially in John's Gospel, Jesus does nothing on his own authority, but glorifies the Father who sent him, speaking and acting only on the Father's

authority (John 5:19). Similarly the Spirit of truth acts on Jesus' authority and glorifies Jesus alone (John 16:13-14). This is why some commentators have referred to the dragon and the two beasts in Revelation as 'the unholy trinity'.

¹³ It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of all; ¹⁴ and by the signs that it is allowed to perform on behalf of the beast, it deceives the inhabitants of earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that had been wounded by the sword and yet lived; ¹⁵ and it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast could even speak and cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be killed.

Revelation 13:13-15

It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of all. The false prophet, i.e. the second beast, counterfeits God's judgments to bolster the specious claim that the first beast is divine: <<*Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt-offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench*>> (1 Kings 18:38), <<*But Elijah answered the captain of fifty, 'If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty.'* Then fire came down from heaven, and consumed him and his fifty>> (2 Kings 1:10), <<*When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?'*>> (Luke 9:54), <<*The first angel blew his trumpet, and there came hail and fire, mixed with blood, and they were hurled to the earth; and a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up*>> (Revelation 8:7), <<*And if anyone wants to harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes; anyone who wants to harm them must be killed in this manner*>> (Revelation 11:5).

By the signs that it is allowed to perform on behalf of the beast, it deceives the inhabitants of earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that had been wounded by the sword and yet lived. It is written of idols that: <<*they have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see*>> (Psalm 115:5). Therefore, the impression that the first beast's image has breath and could even speak may simply be another hoax, one with which it deceives those who dwell on the earth. However, it is more likely that this describes some kind of miracle worked by demonic power yet still subject to God's sovereign control, it was allowed (13:14 and 19:20). Those who refuse to worship the symbol of the state, whether bowing to Nebuchadnezzar's statue (Daniel Chapter 3), or burning incense to the Roman emperor, cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be killed. Refer to the comments on vv.16-17.

Paul too seems to have had a clear mental image of what John describes here: <<*The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved*>> (2 Thessalonians 2:9-10).

¹⁶ Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, ¹⁷ so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name.

Revelation 13:16-17

Small and great, rich and poor, free and slave. There will be no favouritism or deference shown to social status. The beast can show no mercy, for it does not share in the grace and love of God.

Marked on the right hand or the forehead. The Israelites bore God's law on their hands and foreheads to signify his authority over their deeds and thoughts: *<<Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead>>* (Deuteronomy 6:6-8). Neither the beast's mark nor the seal of God on believers' foreheads (Exodus 28:36-38, Ezekiel 9:4, Revelation 7:3 and 14:1), have to be understood as physical features, although they may be that. Both symbolise the spiritual control of heart allegiance and behaviour, either by the beast or by the Lamb; but God's seal secures safety.

According to early church tradition, residents and visitors to the city of Hierapolis had to pass through the Domitian Gate and then swear allegiance to the emperor as their sovereign lord. When the apostle Philip arrived, he refused to do so, stating that Jesus was the only Lord he was bound to. He was subsequently forced to watch his wife and children being slaughtered and was then crucified for his faithfulness to Christ.



Philip's Tomb in Hierapolis

So that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. It was this identifying mark of allegiance that would allow people not just to engage in commerce but to buy the basic staples of life. This is what is meant by the statement: *<<cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be killed>>* (v.15).

¹⁸ This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred and sixty-six.

Revelation 13:18

This calls for wisdom. The believer's responsibility is not to know everything in advance, but to be faithful no matter whether the threat to faith comes from the final antichrist figure itself or from one of its many predecessors. As stated in the section introduction, John had written in an earlier letter: *<<Children, it is the*

last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour>> (1 John 2:18). It is every bit as vital for Christians to resist the 'many' as 'the one'.

The number of the beast, which is six hundred and sixty-six or 666, may symbolise creaturely deficiency as the number of a man in contrast to divine completeness, symbolised by seven. The invitation to one with understanding to calculate the number, however, suggests the use of gematria, an ancient code using the numerical values of letters. Both 'beast' and 'Nero Cæsar', written in Hebrew characters, add up to 666, although these are poor transliterations. However, many interpreters expect a future, greater fulfilment in a world ruler who is violently opposed to God and his people. Therefore, there are many scholars who are prepared to take this statement of John to be relevant in the ancient past as he took this opportunity to make a political statement against his own and the church's oppressors. Nero is seen by this group of a scholars as being the beast's head that was mortally wounded (v.3).

Perhaps a better way of interpreting the number 666 is not to use it as a way of identifying the beast but of characterising him, for it dramatises him as evil. However, it should also be recognised that John does clearly state that it is the number of a person.

For most readers it would seem better to take John's visions as symbolic rather than literal, otherwise there is a danger of over analysis of what was seen and what will actually occur when the time of the end does come.